CHAPTER ONE

EUROPE AND THE CHRISTENDOM NARRATIVE:
FROM SINGULARIZATION TO PLURALISM

Well into the twentieth century, it has been the expectation of the majority of scholars that religions will sooner or later disappear from the modern world. Scholars based their expectation on the assumption that in the wake of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment the rational and scientific worldview would ultimately lead to a decline of religious truth-claims. We have been told that in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the rise of modern science, the separation of church and state, industrialization, and individualization have led to an inescapable secularization and a disenchantment of the world. In these scenarios, Europe was regarded as the ‘normal case,’ representing a development that sooner or later would seize the rest of the world.

Much to the surprise of sociologists and scholars of religion, the past thirty years have witnessed a remarkable revival of religious identity claims. Religions entered the public spheres and became strong identity markers both for individuals and for communities. In the name of religious traditions people raised political claims and interpreted history with reference to an ongoing global apocalyptic scenario, to a struggle between ‘good’ and ‘evil,’ or to the conviction that the project

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The Secularization Theory Revisited

1 See, e.g., Chadwick, The Secularization of the European Mind; Wilson, God’s Funeral.
of modernity has utterly failed. Often, these claims went hand in hand with violent action or even terrorism.

Scholars of religion have responded to this development by adjusting their older models of interpretation. A number of them now tend to limit the process of secularization to Europe. For Peter L. Berger, the world today is massively religious, with two exceptions—Europe and the intellectuals and academics that are educated in the West. This notion inverts the older assumption that North America is the exception, while Europe is the rule; in contrast to Europe, in the United States religion has remained a powerful element of society, lending vitality and ethos to democracy. Berger is not the only one who regards Europe as an exceptional case. Hartmut Lehmann has recently approached secularization as “Europäischen Sonderweg.” He considers Europeans’ relation to religion to be broken in many ways, which becomes evident if we compare Europe to non-European cultures; European languages are replete with terms that reveal a critical distancing from religion; pre-Christian ancient cultures have become part of education and identity; and political ideologies that criticize religion have gained the upper hand.

Another voice in this debate is Grace Davie. She puts Europe in a global context and states that with regard to modern parameters of faith Europe is an “exceptional case”—“a statement that many Europeans find hard to accept in that it flies in the face not only of their own experience, but of deeply embedded assumptions. Europeans are prone to believe that what they do today everyone else will do tomorrow.” What we see in Europe is an increasing tension between “belief” and “practice”—a dramatic decline of participation in church activities on the one hand, and a high degree of individual religious beliefs on the other. Her slogan for this development is “believing without belonging.” As an explanation Davie suggests that religion has become a public actor in civil society that people support without combining this support with an active participation in institutionalized churches. In this context she speaks of “vicarious religion”: “Could it be that Euro-

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2 One of the best available discussions of secularization theory and its successors is David Herbert’s “Rethinking Secularization,” pp. 29–61 of his Religion and Civil Society.
4 Lehmann, Säkularisierung.
5 Davie, Europe: The Exceptional Case, ix.